



BEYOND THE CRUISE SHIP: To Make Most of Exploring Ports of Call, Cruise Lines Offer Go-To Shore Excursions

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MIAMI, June 14, 2018 /PRNewswire/ -- Your cruise vacation takes you on a beautiful ship, with comfortable accommodations, fine cuisine and more tantalizing activities than you can possibly do in a week. But you'll also be visiting fascinating ports of call almost every day. So the question is, what's the best way to take advantage of exploring the destinations you visit?



For veteran cruise passengers, the go-to options are shore excursions offered by cruise lines. With years of experience in organizing the most popular shore excursions and long-standing relationships with local tour guides, the cruise lines offer a practical and hassle-free way to see the sights, experience local culture, safely pursue adventure activities such as snorkeling and ziplining, and arrive at the best lounge chairs on the best beaches – icy cold rum drinks optional.

"Tours are the best way to get to know the country and its people in one day," says Frank Boensch, director of shore excursions for Germany-based AIDA Cruises. "The choice is huge. For instance, I often recommend bike tours for our active guests because you see the sights while pedaling, providing a whole different perspective. It's amazing how diverse our world is and it's unbelievable what you can experience."

Whether you are looking to enjoy year-round summertime weather in the Caribbean on Carnival Cruise Line, explore the Mediterranean including small heritage towns (so called "borghi") on Italy-based Costa Cruises, explore the beautiful beaches, fascinating culture and World War II sites of the South Pacific islands with P&O Cruises Australia or see the world with Cunard, shore excursions are the key to once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Local guides add insight, and special activities add a wow factor.

The tours represent significant value, as cruise lines partner with qualified tour companies and feature transportation, expert guides, admission or activities fees and, in some cases, lunch and drinks. To prove the value proposition of their shore excursions, Carnival Cruise Line, Holland America Line and Princess Cruises all offer a best-price guarantee.

Peace of mind is another benefit, as cruise companies are in contact with their partner tour operators and able to track where a particular tour is, and when passengers will be returning to the ship. In the rare case of a port of call being canceled, passengers booking through the cruise line will have their shore excursions costs refunded.

To help you find the tour that's right for you, here are some tips from shore excursion pros.

Think about what you want to do. "My first question is always, "What do you want to see?" says Claudio Schulze, destinations manager on the new, ultra-luxury, 600-passenger ship Seabourn Ovation.

Bus tours work well for some passengers, particularly those who want to see the top sights without extensive walking. Active tours provide even more Instagram-worthy experiences and include such options as flightseeing, deep-sea fishing, kayaking, mountain biking, horseback riding, hiking and ATV adventure, to name a few.

Culture vultures will find tours focusing on cooking classes, dance performances and local artist studios. On lines such as Holland America Line and Seabourn, there is also the option of private tours.

Weigh excursions vs. DIY. On paper, you may think you can get around on your own. But in some ports, key sights are a significant distance from the

pier. You can try your luck with a local taxi, but after dealing with issues such as language and currency exchange, you may find you don't get to all the places you've come to see.

Shore excursions, on the other hand, are choreographed to get you to the key sights in the time that you have in port and are conducted by local guides who share their own stories.

"It's far more immersive than trying to follow a map or flick through the pages of a huge guide book on your own," says Alison Webster, a port presenter for British line P&O Cruises. "You leave the planning to someone else and spend your precious port time enjoying your chosen destination or attraction."

Do a little research. Shore excursion experts say guests benefit from knowing at least something in advance about the destinations they will visit.

Cruise lines make it easy with websites packed with information – Holland America Line even has advice from the experts at *Afar* magazine.

Hamish Gordon, the line's senior manager of group shore excursions, says before they get to the ship, guests should download the shore excursion brochure and call the cruise line's shore excursion desk with any questions.

He also recommends a quick Google search of each port to check out the top attractions you might want to see.

Check peer reviews. When deciding on excursions, it's advisable to read peer reviews online, either on independent websites such as CruiseCritic.com and TripAdvisor or on the cruise line websites.

Carnival Cruise Line, for instance, encourages passenger reviews and ratings (the ratings system is managed by an outside company) and lists the top five excursions in each port of call.

"All are actual passenger reviews. It tells you what your fellow passengers have done and which they have particularly enjoyed," says Gavin Burgess, senior shore excursion manager onboard the new, 3,960-passenger Carnival Horizon. "You'll learn, for instance, that if you go to Alaska and don't do shore excursions into the wilderness, it's like going to Egypt and not seeing the pyramids."

Use onboard resources. Shipboard port presentations by destination experts provide information about each port of call, including outlining mistakes people make and how to avoid them.

It's a good idea to attend these sessions, whether you're doing a shore excursion or plan to explore independently. You may also want to speak personally to the experts, who can share their first-hand experiences.

"It's their job to know the places that you visit well and ensure that you get the most enjoyment from your time ashore," says Webster of P&O Cruises.

At the new state-of-the-art Explorations Center in the Crow's Nest lounge on select Holland America Line ships, guests can also sit down and view digital displays highlighting shore experiences.

Know your limits. It's important to read descriptions and choose tours that are right for you.

"Mobility and activity level are certainly things to be considered," advises Rex Donasco, shore excursion manager with Princess Cruises, and currently on the Ruby Princess in Alaska.

Shore excursion brochures rank activity levels from low to high. Carnival Cruise Line, for instance, with its newly rebranded Carnival Adventures program, uses a symbol of a person, ranging from one person being minimum activity to four meaning full-on athleticism. If you are unsure about where you fit into the spectrum, call ahead or simply consult with the shore excursion team onboard your ship.

"Be assured there is something for everyone," said Michael Mihajlov, destinations director for P&O Cruises Australia.

Include excursions in your budget. You don't want to miss a key experience because you get hung up on price while cruising.

Budget ahead for excursions that make you say "wow," suggest the experts.

Princess Cruises' Donasco counts on his must-do list a seaplane flight from Juneau to the Taku Lodge, which he says focuses on the best of Alaska in one excursion.

"You see miles of glacial ice from the sky before landing at a remote log cabin where you explore wilderness trails and watch for wildlife, before enjoying a delicious salmon feast," he says. "It's an unbelievable experience."

Book in advance. You'll want to reserve your must-do shore excursions prior to your cruise because some popular tours, including active excursions and other small-group experiences, tend to sell out. If you change your mind, you can make changes when you get to the ship.

If you have a specific request, such as a need for transportation with a wheelchair lift or a food allergy, it's advisable to alert the shore excursion team well in advance.

Read what's on your ticket. When you receive your shore excursion tickets on the ship, included will be specific information about each tour. It's important to read that information.

"You would think everyone would know to bring a swimsuit on a snorkeling tour, but they forget," Carnival Cruise Line's Burgess says. "When they are on vacation, some people don't want to think. That's fine. We've got you covered. We want you to have fun and not worry about anything. We spell it out for you so you have the most enjoyable time."

Whichever shore excursions you choose, plan to take lots of photos and share the experience – not only with those at home via social media posts, but also with new friends on the ship.

"Often guests on a shore excursion have such an amazing bonding experience," says Holland America Line's Gordon. "It's not unusual to see them

dining or having drinks together, swapping photos on their cellphones."

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